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LET'S DO A PLAY

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LET'S DO A PLAY

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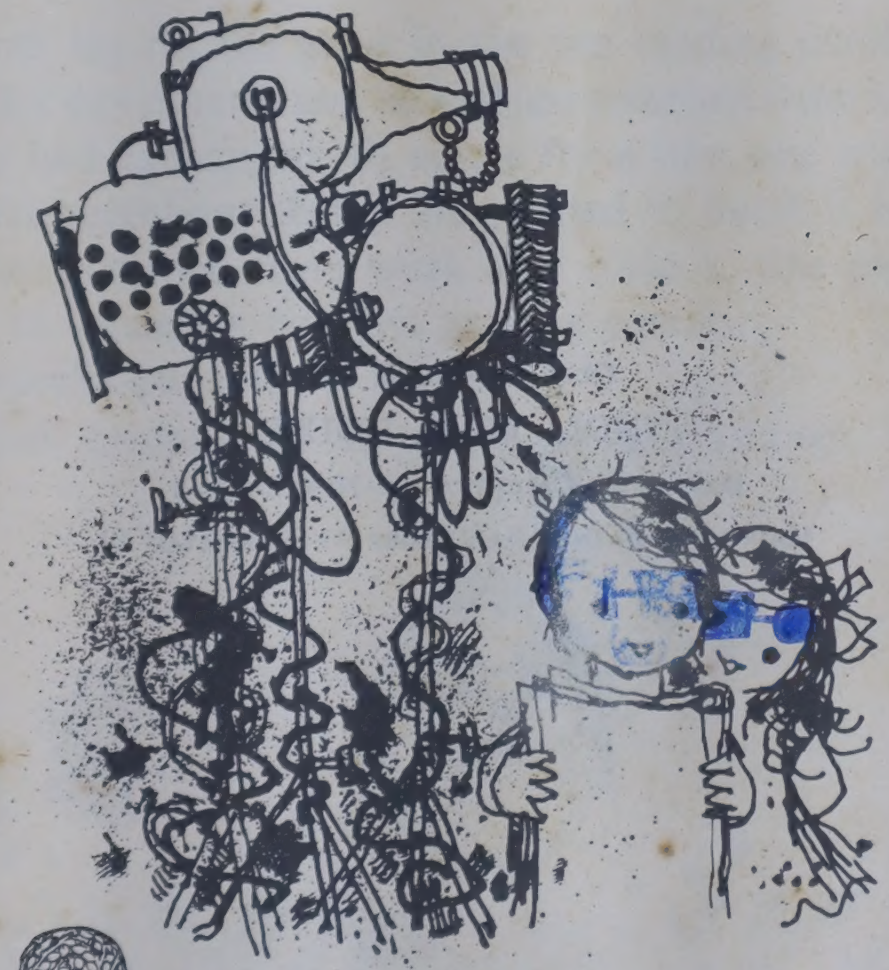

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BANGALORE

THE MAGIC CALL

Deepak lay on the grass in the sun reading comics. It was the last day of term and he had just returned from school where he had exchanged his comic for a new one with his friend and neighbour Rafiq. He wanted to finish it before his mother returned from work at 5 o'clock. She did not like him to waste his holidays reading comics.

"Pee-peeha-papee!"

Startled, Deepak sat up as he heard a strange, sharp whistle.

"Pee-peeha-papee!" Again the curious sound rang out. Deepak leapt up and ran to the gate which led to the narrow lane in front of his house. At the turn of the lane, he saw a tall dark man, with fierce moustaches and twinkling eyes, smiling at him. He wore a big yellow turban wound loosely round his head and a dark red *kurta* over a white *dhoti*. Two gold rings glittered from his ears. He carried a big pack on his back. With him were a young lad and a small boy, dressed like him, except that the little boy's turban was green.

"Pee-peeha-papee!" squeaked the big man. Deepak noticed that he seemed to have some sort of whistle inside his mouth.

Suddenly Deepak turned back and ran to a low hedge that separated his part of the lawn from the next-door compound.

"Dido," he called excitedly. "Dido, where are you? Come out. Come quick."

"Coming," answered a voice, and a tall, thin boy ran out. This was Rafiq, Deepak's best friend, better known as Dido to his friends.

"Coming," called out another voice, rather high and thin, and out ran a pretty, plump little girl with curly hair and dimpled smile.

"Oh, bother," grumbled Deepak. "I didn't call you, Paro."

The little girl stopped smiling. She was Parveen, Rafiq's sister and great admirer. She always wanted to do what her brother did although she was only ten years old. Both Rafiq and Deepak were over 12, and Deepak did not like

having Paro (as her family called her) tagging along and spoiling their fun.

"Never mind her," said Dido, "what did you want me for?"

"There's a puppet-man in the lane and I think he is going to put up his stand in the bazaar. Let's go and see the fun."

"Take me too," cried Paro, running behind the boys as they dashed into the lane.

"Mee-too-oo," piped another voice as a chubby, fat, little ball of a boy rolled up and started running behind Paro.

"Now look what you've done," shouted Deepak. "We will have to take Tuppo along as well!"

"Let's all go," said Dido, who liked to look on the bright side of things. "Hold my hand, Paro," he called to his sister.

"Come along. Ride pick-a-back, Tuppo," said Deepak making the best of a bad job, as he hauled his five-year-old little brother on to his back.

They soon reached the market-square where a crowd had gathered. "Pee-peeha-papee," squeaked the Puppet-man's whistle. "Dum-ta-ta-dum," boomed the lad's drum.

The children pushed their way through the crowd till they got to the front. They sat down with the other on-lookers. The Puppet-man had set up a small box-like stage. From behind it, he worked his puppets with long strings which were wound round his fingers.

On the stage a *durbar*-scene was being enacted. The King, Amar Singh Rathod, and his Queen, Hadi Rani, were sitting on a balcony. They were beautifully dressed wooden dolls. The King's moustaches were as fierce as those of the Puppet-

man and he had tiny rings in his ears and a gold crown on his head. The Queen was dressed in red and silver with gleaming jewels around her neck. Below them a court dancer was dancing. The Puppet-man moved her with great skill. She whirled and turned and her skirt swished and swirled.

"Pee-peeha-papee," shrilled the whistle. "Dum-ta-ta-dum," boomed the drum. Then a *madari*—a juggler—appeared. He played a pipe and a snake wriggled out of his basket, while a black-and-white dog turned somersaults. Suddenly a messenger-doll rushed in. The enemy was attacking! Amar Singh Rathod got up, picked up his sword, got on his black horse and rode away.

The scene changed. Now it was a 'battle-scene'. Amar Singh on his black horse fought his enemy who rode a red horse. The horses dashed against each other. The swords of the fighters clashed. "Dum-ta-ta-dum, dum-ta-ta-dum,"

crashed the *dholak*. "Pee-peeha-papee," screeched the whistle.

Amar Singh was victorious. The King on the red horse fell and lay dead.

The crowd clapped for joy. Then the little boy with the green turban got up and, picking up his clay pot, started walking round. People dropped coins into the pot.

"Oh, gosh!" exclaimed Deepak. "I have no money. Have you got some, Dido?"

Rafiq shook his head silently.

"I have some," piped in Paro, pulling a shiny 25-paise bit out of her pocket.

"Oh, good. Give it to him," said Deepak, thinking that girls did have their uses in tight corners!

Paro dropped the coin into the pot and the children

moved off with the rest of the audience.

"Let's hurry, Deepak," said Dido. "They must be worrying about us at home."

The four of them began to run back down the lane.

"I say, why can't we do our own show?" panted Deepak.

"Where will we get the puppets?" asked Dido.

"We don't need puppets, silly. We'll act the parts ourselves," replied Deepak. "I shall be Amar Singh Rathod," he added, flourishing his arms, as though he held a sword in one of them. "That is, unless you want to be him," he said to Dido.

"Oh no," answered Dido. "I should like to be the defeated King. It's much more fun acting a death-scene," and he rolled his eyes, flung out his arms and flopped down on the ground in such a comic manner that all the children burst out laughing.

"Mee-ee too-oo," shouted chubby Tuppo and he rolled over on top of Dido.

"Get up, Dido," cried Paro as Deepak picked Tuppo off the struggling Dido. "Look, Deepak, there's a taxi outside your gate and your mother is calling you."

"Deepak, where have you been?" called an anxious voice. "And thank goodness, there is that naughty Tuppo. I was so worried when I didn't find you at home. Had you forgotten that Uncle Prem was to arrive this evening from Bombay? There was nobody here to receive him!" Deepak's mother came out of the gate scolding her sons.

"I am so sorry Ma, I did forget. We went to see a puppet-show. Please forgive me, Uncle," Deepak said as a tall man came out of the taxi and embraced him warmly.

"That's all right, son. The *Kathputliwalla* is a real magician and I can well understand your falling under his spell. This is your cousin, Anu," he added, as a young girl of about 16 got out of the taxi.

"Hullo, Anu Didi. I don't remember you," said Deepak shyly.

"But I remember you," laughed Anu, as she greeted him.

"Mee-too-oo. Mee-too," shouted Tuppo.

"You too, little fellow," Anu added picking up Tuppo and hugging him.

"Bring the luggage in, boys," said Deepak's mother. "Dido's mother has very kindly got a big tea ready for all of us."

"Hurray!" shouted the children, picking up the bags and boxes and hurrying in.

CURTAIN UP!

The grown-ups and children crowded into the living-room next door and gathered round the table. There Dido's mother, Mrs Anwar, a smiling plump lady, who looked just like a bigger version of her daughter, Parveen, sat pouring cups of tea for the adults and mugs of milk for the young folk. Hot *jalebis* and *pakoras* were passed round while everyone talked and ate with equal zest.

Deepak was most excited to meet his uncle, who was his mother's only brother. Uncle Prem had come up from Bombay with a troupe of players to take part in an All-India Drama Festival. His group was called Hind Manch (Indian Stage) and consisted of about 20 members. The troupe members were living in a hostel along with all the other troupes, but as his sister was in town, Uncle Prem and his daughter Anu were to stay with their relations. Anu had just done her Higher Secondary examination and was having a long holiday before her results would be declared, after which she could join college. So she too was taking part in one of the two plays the Hind Manch group were to put up.

"What plays will you be doing, Uncle?" asked Deepak.

"We have brought two plays, son," replied Uncle Prem. "One is a historical play called "Tughlaq" by an Indian writer. It is about a great Indian king."

"Do you mean Mad Tughlaq?" asked Dido, who was keen on history.

"Yes, Mohammad Tughlaq was sometimes called mad. He was also called a genius. This play tells how this clever ruler became a cruel, almost insane tyrant by the end of his life."

"And the other play?" asked Deepak.

"The other play I have written myself. It's a comedy about modern life."

"It is really very funny!" said Anu, laughing.

"And you are very funny in it," added her father.

"Are you acting, Anu?" asked Deepak enviously.

"She is indeed," replied Uncle Prem, "and very good she is too."

"I want to be an actor too," cried Deepak. "Uncle, can't I be an actor in Hind Manch?"

"Not so fast, son. You still have to finish school. Anu is going to college soon. And she will only decide whether she will be an actress, a teacher, a journalist or whatever, afterwards. But don't you want to be a pilot like your father, Deepak?" he added.

Here Mrs Anwar gave a quick look at Deepak's mother and exclaimed, "Oh no!" But Deepak's mother just kept quiet. There was an awkward silence and everyone looked uncomfortable. Deepak's father, Flying Officer Arjan Das, a brave pilot in the Air Force, had lost his life in the defence of his country some years before. Since she had been left a widow, Mrs Das had been teaching in a girls' college. Her neighbours, the Anwars, helped look after her smaller son Tuppo while she was at work. In fact, Mrs Anwar often had

both boys over when Mrs Das had to work late in college.

"I wanted to be a pilot before, but now I want to be an actor," Deepak said. Then he continued, "We were just talking of doing a play, like the *kathputli* show and I was to be Amar Singh Rathod."

"And I the wounded Knight," cried Dido, flopping back in his chair, flinging out his arms and making everybody laugh.

"Mee-too-oo! Mee-too-oo!" Tuppo tried to flop back like Dido but toppled right out of his chair onto the ground.

"Really Tuppo, you naughty boy," cried Mrs Das as everybody burst out laughing and Anu picked up the 'wounded Knight'.

"Will you help us do our play, Uncle?" asked Deepak.

"Certainly. But first I must see to mine," replied Uncle Prem. "It's getting late, Anu. We must go to the theatre."

"Must you go immediately? You have just arrived," said Mrs Das.

"You know how it is," replied her brother. "I promised to meet my stage-manager there."

"May we come too?" asked Dido.

"Of course."

"Mee-too," cried Tuppo.

"No, no, Tuppo," began Tuppo's mother.

"Let him come, Aunty," broke in Anu. "I'll look after him."

"We won't be long," added Uncle Prem. "I just want to get an idea of the stage and the lighting facilities."

"I can drop you at the theatre," said Mr Anwar, a quiet man who had not said a word till then. "I have an appoint-

ment that side of town and I can pick you up in the car after an hour."

Mr Anwar dropped them at the Central Theatre and drove off. A fat gentleman came running up to Uncle Prem and shook him by the hand. "I am so glad to see you," he said. "Your stage-manager, Mr Katkar, is waiting inside for you." He led them into an open foyer. Two large doors stood open. They went in.

Inside the hall only a faint light shone. The rows and rows of seats stood empty. At the far end a dark heavy curtain shut off the stage.

"Curtain up!" Uncle Prem shouted suddenly.

A strange whirring sound filled the hall. Slowly the heavy velvet curtains parted.

Deepak held his breath with excitement. The stage lay open, dark and silent in front of him. He ran forward and went up a short flight of steps on the side that led onto the stage.

"Stage lights on," called Uncle Prem.

In a flash the whole stage was flooded with strong, bright lights. In the centre of the bare boards stood a small figure—Deepak! He looked out into the dimly lit hall.

"Bravo!" cried Dido clapping his hands. Deepak gave a deep bow. All the children clapped and laughed.

"Mee-too!" cried Tuppo.

"Come on, all of you," said Uncle Prem. "Let's join that hero on the stage."

THE ACTOR'S HOME

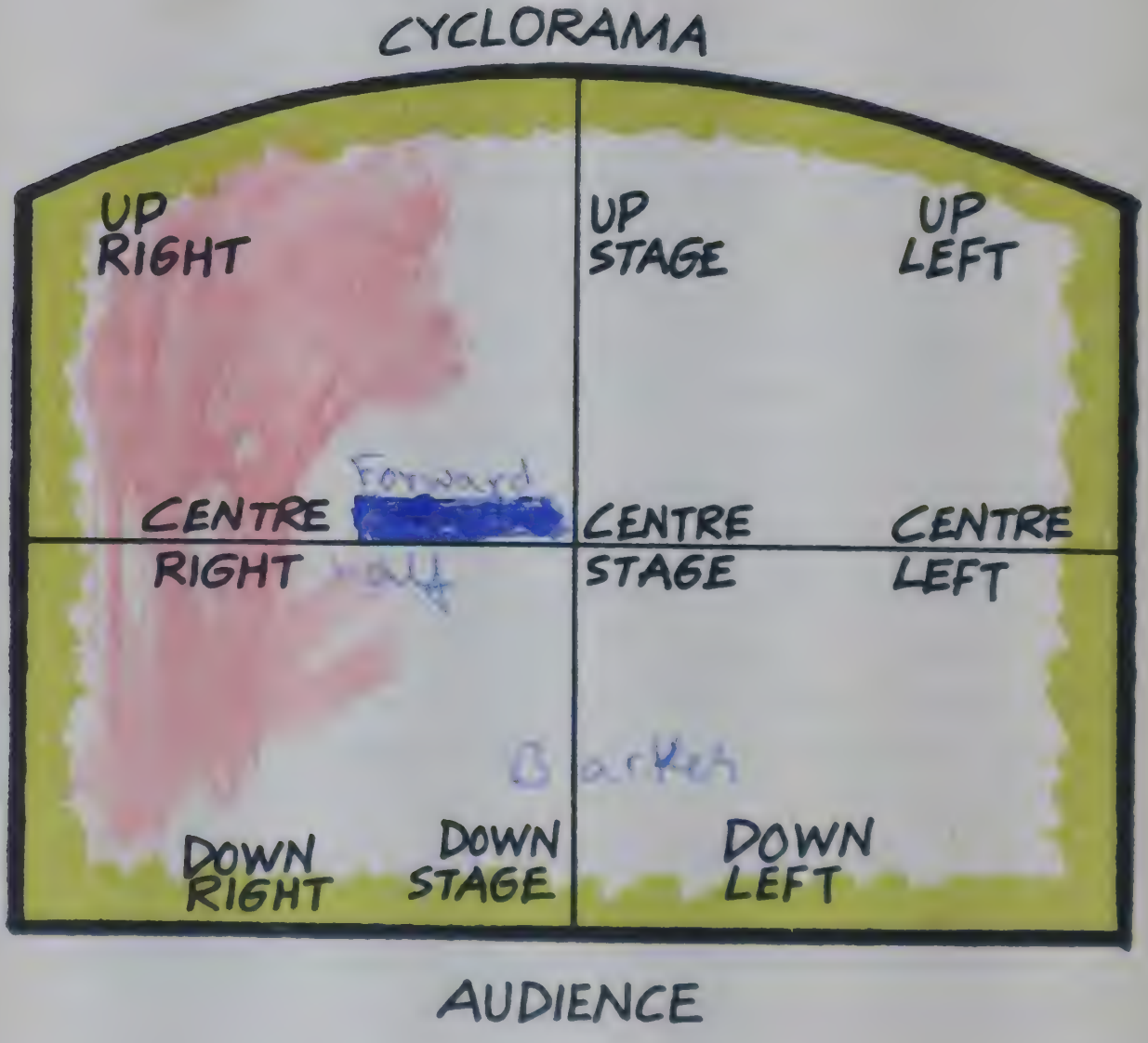
For a brief flash of time, while Deepak stood alone on the stage, and the lights came on, he looked out into the vast dark hall, and felt a sudden sense of joy and power. Then Dido broke the magic moment with his cry 'Bravo' and Deepak answered with a bow. But in that moment Deepak made a silent promise to himself—some day he would actually stand on a brightly lit stage and make a real bow to a real audience.

Then everybody came on to the stage.

Uncle Prem said, "The stage and the back-stage area is an actor's true home. He feels happiest when he is on stage. When he looks out into the hall and hears the applause of the audience, that is his real reward. He asks for nothing more."

These were Deepak's thoughts too and he was most surprised to hear that all actors felt as he did.

"But before that moment arrives," went on Uncle Prem, "a lot of very hard team-work has to be put in. First let me explain the stage to you. It is divided into three areas—Centre, Up Stage and Down Stage. Each part is again divided into centre, left and right. All these positions are considered from the actor's point of view. Let me give you a practical demonstration. Deepak, come here."


CYCLORAMA
UP RIGHT
UP STAGE
UP LEFT
Forward
CENTRE
CENTRE
CENTRE
RIGHT
STAGE
LEFT
DOWN RIGHT
DOWN STAGE
DOWN LEFT
AUDIENCE

"Mee-ee too!" shouted Tuppo from Anu's arms.

"All right. First Tuppo. Anu, put him down on position Centre Stage."

Anu placed Tuppo right in the middle of the stage. He stood there proudly.

"Now, Deepak, take up position Centre Right—that is to the right of Tuppo as you look out into the hall. Dido, Centre Left."

The two boys stood in their places.

"Now boys, go to positions Down Left and Down Right."

"Which way would that be?" asked Dido.

"Towards the audience." The boys moved, Deepak to Down Right and Dido to Down Left.

"Paro, where are you?" asked Uncle Prem.

"Here," replied Paro in a quiet voice. Paro had been feeling left out and was sulky.

"Go right up and stand behind Tuppo. No, go as far back on the stage as you can."

Paro ran up the stage and stood as far back in the centre as she could. "There's a wall," she called. "I can't go any farther." A slightly curved wall ran all the way along the back of the stage.

"That 'wall' is called the cyclorama," Uncle Prem explained. "By throwing light on it many wonderful effects such as colours or shadows can be produced. Now Dido, cross over and stand Up Stage Right."

Dido looked puzzled. Anu guided him with a turn of her head. He quickly ran diagonally from Down Left to the far corner behind Deepak.

"Deepak, go Up Left."

Deepak ran across and stood on Paro's left.

"A director gives directions such as these to his actors when he wants them to move. And also to his lightsman. No actor wanders around the stage just as he pleases. He only makes a move when it is necessary."

"But what if there is a very exciting fighting-scene?" asked Deepak. He was still dreaming of playing Amar Singh Rathod.

"Even in a fighting-scene, each move is carefully planned. If each actor moved about as he wished, there would be such confusion that the audience would not be able to make out what was happening. Every actor has to be careful not to stand in front of another—not to 'cover' him, as we say. He must be still when another actor is making an important move or speech, so as not to distract the audience. In short, my dear Deepak, an actor has to learn to be a disciplined and unselfish team-worker. But come along now, let me explain the rest of the stage area to you."

Uncle Prem took the children to the left of the stage behind some large boards.

"This area is called the 'Wings', and is on either side. It is on the stage, but out of sight of the audience. It is here that actors wait before they come on for their scenes, and the back-stage workers keep the things which will be required. These are called 'properties' or 'props'—a bag or an umbrella..."

"Or a sword," broke in Dido.

"Or a sword that an actor may need in one of the scenes."

"What's that?" asked Paro pointing to a huge board

which was full of switches, wires and big wooden handles. A high stool stood in front of it.

"This is the Light and Dimmer Board," explained Uncle Prem. "These switches are numbered according to the lights they control."

"What do you do with the handles?" asked Deepak.

"The handles are 'dimmers'," replied Uncle Prem. "By pulling them down or pushing them up, you can slowly dim or brighten a whole row of lights. Come back on the stage and look up."

The children all ran back and looked up. Tuppo bent his head so far back that he fell over and had to be picked up by Anu.

The ceiling of the stage area was so high that it was hardly visible. High above the stage were rows and rows of brightly shining lights. Deepak gasped with surprise. He had never seen so many bulbs in his life!

"Each row of lights is called a batten and each batten is controlled by a single switch."

"What are those big black lights?" asked Dido, pointing to single lights with large bulbs.

"Those are spotlights. They are very powerful but only light up a small area on the stage."

"Can battens as well as spotlights be dimmed?" asked Deepak.

"Certainly. Let me show you."

Uncle Prem went to the switch-board. "First I will dim the central batten." He moved a handle slowly and a whole row of lights got dimmer and dimmer till they faded out. "Now here is a spot." A bright shining light came on.

DANGER
440VOLTS

Slowly, as Uncle Prem moved another handle, it too faded out.

Suddenly Uncle Prem called, "Katkar, can you fly down the red screen?"

"Sure," answered a voice from among the ropes and rafters overhead. There was a creaking sound and slowly a red screen dropped across the centre of the stage shutting the back half from view. It was suspended by two ropes from a long pole.

"You can now act a scene on the front half of the stage," said Uncle Prem, "while the stage-crew set up the next scene behind the screen. Take it up!" he called.

The red screen began moving up.

"Mee-ee too," cried Tuppo, wriggling out of Anu's arms. He ran and tried to catch the screen.

"Not you, little fellow," cried Anu.

"Can actors be made to fly up or down?" asked Deepak, proudly using real 'theatre terms'.

"Certainly. I have seen a young man swinging on a trapeze cross-bar and somersaulting off it on to the stage."

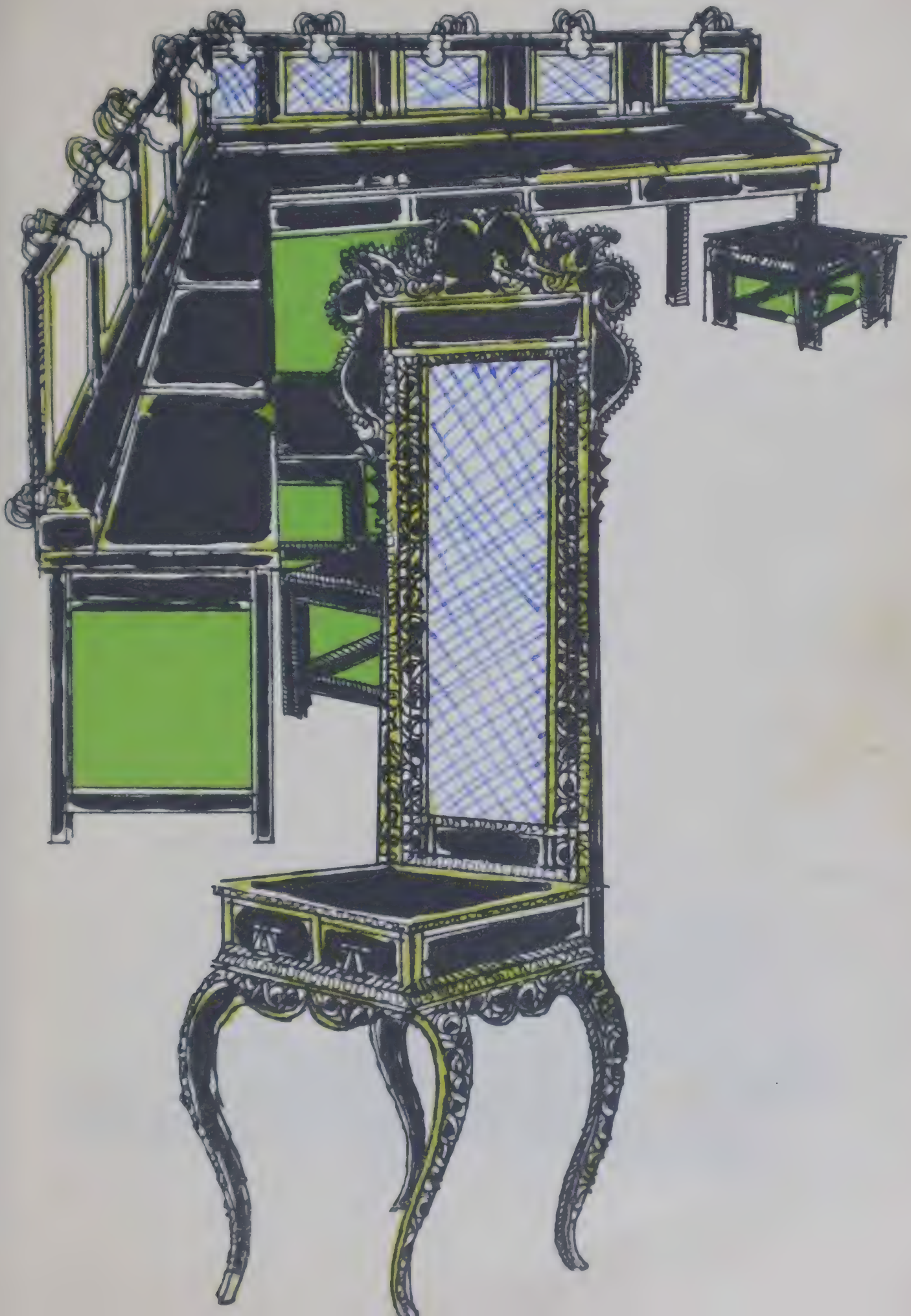
"What fun! I'd love to try that!" cried Dido.

"There is a trap-door on the stage floor which when lifted leads down some steps into a basement below the stage."

"What a capital idea for an escape-scene!" cried Deepak.

"Now come back-stage to the green-rooms."

They went through the wings into a corridor from which three rooms branched off. One was full of cupboards and boxes. This was where the costumes were kept and ironed. The other two rooms were lined with dressing-tables with



large mirrors.

"But these rooms are not green," cried Paro, looking at the white walls.

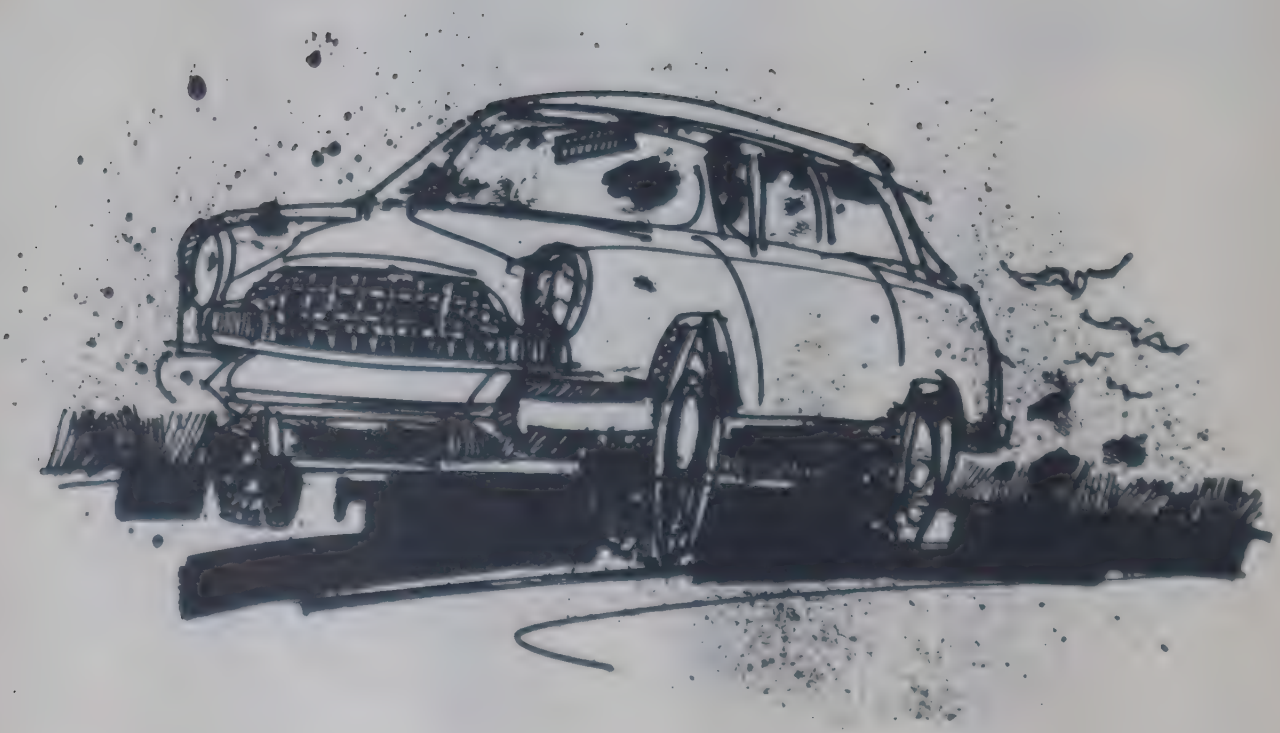
"Green-rooms are dressing-rooms," explained Uncle Prem. "One is for the actresses and the other for the actors."

Just then a car honked two or three times.

"That's our car," cried Dido.

"Come along then," said Uncle Prem. "You have seen the actor's home and now it's time for you to go to your own home. Tomorrow we'll come and see a rehearsal."

As they piled into the car to go home, Deepak thought of the day when the theatre would be his real home.



BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING

"Uncle, how do you do a play?" asked Paro, as they were on their way to the theatre the next morning.

"What a silly question!" scoffed Deepak.

"Not at all," said Uncle Prem. "Well, Paro, let's begin at the beginning. You must first get together a group of people who are keen on working in theatre. Not only those who want to act but many others who are interested in costumes, make-up, or stage-management such as lighting and sound effects. Then you must find a good play."

"Or write one," put in Dido.

"Or write one. But that is more difficult and takes a long time. The choice of a play is very important. It can be a sad one . . . "

"A tragedy?" asked Deepak.

"Yes. Or a funny play."

"A comic?" asked Paro.

"Not a comic, silly," said Dido, "a comedy. Am I right, Uncle?"

"Yes. Your play, whether funny or sad, whether about ancient times or modern days, must be of interest to your audience. Otherwise they will not come to see it. Then you must see that you have enough actors to fill all the parts."

"That is known as the cast," put in Anu.

"You get your group together and choose a director. Then you hold a play-reading. You can read several plays and make a choice. Actors can take turns at reading parts they would like to do. The final choice of who will do which role lies with the director."

"Is the director more important than the hero or heroine?" asked Deepak.

"Everyone works as a team and all are important, but the director is the leader of the team," replied Uncle Prem. "It is he who has to work out the 'moves' of the actors and it is he who helps them to act their roles as best they can."

Deepak began to wonder whether it wouldn't be better to be a director. "Can the director also act in the play?" he asked.

"Only if he has to. It is best for a director not to act as he has so much on his hands—directing the others' acting, seeing that the light and sound effects are correct, that the costumes are right and the sets properly made."

Deepak sighed. It was good being the captain of a team, but a 'non-playing' captain must miss most of the fun, he thought.

"Who is the next most important member of the team?" he asked.

"The stage-manager," was Uncle Prem's surprising reply. "The stage-manager has to organise rehearsals; see that the actors are learning their lines; that the costumes and sets are ready on time; that the hall is booked, the tickets sold—in fact, he is the real manager of the whole group. But he is also one of the most unselfish of theatre-

workers, because he does not appear on the stage and few people realise how important he is."

Deepak was quite sure he did not want to be a stage-manager!

"But how do you do the play?" asked Paro again.

"Once you have chosen your cast, you hold rehearsals. If it is a long play, you first do only a few scenes at a time. Most plays have three parts or acts. Each act can have a number of scenes. If your actors are keen and good, they learn their parts—or lines, as we call them—as soon as possible. Then they quickly master the 'moves' the director gives them. Difficult scenes have to be rehearsed over and over again. An actor has to have a lot of patience, not only in getting his own part correct, but also in helping other actors with theirs."

Deepak began to realise that it was not quite so easy to be an actor as he had imagined.

"Who is the most important actor?" he asked.

"In a good theatre team, no actor is more or less important than another. Although some parts may be longer and more difficult, every single person on stage is equally important. The best parts or roles are given to the persons who have the greatest acting talent. But even the role of a messenger or that of a member of a crowd in a bazaar-scene can ruin a play if the training is poor, and not given enough attention. And Deepak," Uncle Prem added with a smile, "the best leading actors and actresses are those who give a lot of time and attention to the actors taking the smaller roles. In fact, in our group, Hind Manch, we make it a point not to give the best parts to the same persons in

all the plays. In one play an actor may be the hero, in the next, an old man, and in a third he may only get the small part of a passer-by."

Deepak blushed. "Oh, I do not mean I have to be the hero every time," he stammered. They all laughed.

"But how do you do the play?" repeated Paro, who could not understand half of what was being said.

"Well, once all the scenes are well rehearsed, the whole play is acted through several times. If the costumes and sets are ready, the actors get a chance to wear their costumes and play on a set stage. Since it is expensive to hire a theatre for rehearsals, the group may only be able to have one or two rehearsals on the stage. These are called 'dress rehearsals' and as we are now at the theatre, you can come and see a dress-rehearsal in progress. You will have to be very quiet and patient because we may have to do the same scene several times until the actors get used to the stage. We also have to test the lights."

"It's lucky we did not bring Tuppo or he'd have wanted to do everything himself," laughed Anu.

"Oh he, and his mee-tooo!" cried Dido in a funny high voice. "He really is too comic."

THE DRESS REHEARSAL

As they entered the theatre they heard a great banging. The stage was open and a lot of people were moving up and down. Carpenters were hammering; stage-hands were setting up a scene; electricians were testing the lights; a man was trying out sound-effects on a tape-recorder.

"Sit in the fourth or fifth row in the centre," Uncle Prem told the children. "I shall be busy but Anu will sit by you and explain things to you."

Deepak and Dido sat down on either side of Anu, while Paro sat by her brother.

"All right. Everybody off the stage," shouted Uncle Prem. "Katkar, are you ready?"

"Sure," answered a voice out of nowhere.

"Lights out!" called Uncle Prem.

Everybody left the stage. The lights went off. The stage curtains closed. It was pitch dark and very silent.

"Start!"

Faintly, as though from a great distance, they heard the *azan*—the call of the Muezzin—then the curtain slowly opened. The stage was dark, only the silhouette of arches being visible. As the *azan* grew louder, a pale blue light lit the back of the stage. They could now see walls, a flight of steps and the arched battlements of a fortress city. Streaks

of yellow light gradually brightened the scene.

"You see how the lights show that dawn is breaking," whispered Anu. "The cry of the *azan* also gives the time and you know that this is a city of mosques by such effects. It is Delhi actually."

"Katkar," called Uncle Prem ruining the atmosphere, "bring up the amber faster."

"Sure," and the yellow glow grew brighter.

The stage was now bathed in light and lots of people came on in wonderful costumes. They wore turbans and embroidered *achkans* or gaily-coloured waistcoats over *shalwars* and long colourful *kurtas*.

"What lovely costumes," whispered Paro.

"We had to study old paintings and books on costumes to learn how people dressed in those days," said Anu. "With a historical play one has to be very careful to get such details correct. We even went to the museum to see what type of swords and shields the soldiers used. The weapons and costumes of the Afghan rulers are quite different from those of the Rajputs."

The play transported the children to the Delhi of the Middle Ages. They saw soldiers, princes, beggars, spies, merchants and kings. They were thrilled by the big, handsome actor who played King Tughlaq and who had a deep, powerful voice. And Paro cried bitterly when the Queen Mother was dragged off by the soldiers to be killed in the market-place.

"Did that really happen?" asked Dido, trying to console his sister.

"Yes, Dido. All the facts and events are historically

correct. But, of course, the playwright puts them together in such a way as to give his own point of view. The writer of this play, Girish Karnad, envisages Tughlaq as a great man, who was betrayed by all his friends, even by the Queen-Mother. That is why he became so bitter and cruel at the end of his reign."

Just then Uncle Prem shouted, "Project! Project, Raju!"

"What does he mean?" whispered Deepak.

"Project means speak clearly and throw out your voice without shouting," said Anu.

The scene showed the King, now sad and lonely, bidding goodbye to his old friend, the historian, Barani, who too was deserting him. Raju was playing Barani.

"Take those lines again," called Uncle Prem.

The actors began the scene again.

"It is no use acting well if the audience cannot hear you clearly," explained Anu. "This is one of the first and most important lessons to learn in acting."

Slowly the play drew to an end. Deepak felt deeply moved by the last scene, where, as dusk fell over the city ramparts, the tired and aged King sat all alone on the steps, his head bowed, lonely and forlorn. The lights faded behind him, leaving him in the shadow and then finally all was dark.

"House lights, Katkar," shouted Uncle Prem.

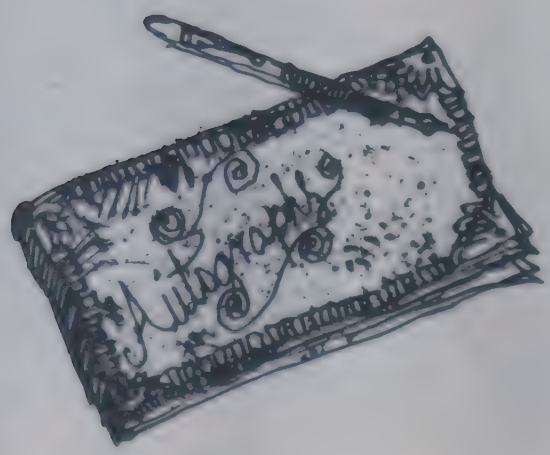
"Sure." It was the expected reply and the hall grew bright.

"Anu, I want to run through the light and sound cues," said Uncle Prem. "You can take the children back-stage to meet the actors."

"Oh good!" cried Deepak. "Do introduce me to Tughlaq, Anu."

"Will he give me his autograph?" asked Dido.

"I am sure he will," said Anu. "Come along."



BEHIND THE SCENES

They went across the stage to the green-rooms where a large lady in a blue sari welcomed them with a smile. "So these are your cousins, Anu."

"Only Deepak is my cousin, Sati Didi " replied Anu, "and these are his friends, Parveen and Rafiq."

"Would you like to have Coca-Cola, children?" the lady asked.

"Yes, please."

Just then they heard heavy footsteps and King Mohammad Tughlaq stood before them.

"Didi, get me a cup of tea, please," he called, pulling off his turban as he entered. "Hullo, Anu," he continued, as he took off his gold *achkan.*

"Ahmed Sahib, meet my cousin, Deepak, who is very keen on acting, and his friends, Parveen and Rafiq," said Anu.

"So, young man, you want to be an actor, do you?" said Ahmed Sahib as he shook hands with the boys and patted Paro on the head.

"If I can act as well as you," replied Deepak shyly.

"I hope you will do much better," laughed Ahmed Sahib, slapping cold cream on his face and wiping it off with cotton wool.

The children watched all the lines and wrinkles on his face disappear. He then put some oil on his beard, which soon turned from grey to black.

"Will you pull off your beard?" asked Paro.

"No, my beard is my own," replied Ahmed Sahib. "But Barani will pull his off soon. Watch him," he added, as Raju, the actor who played Barani, entered the green-room.

Paro watched carefully as Raju began taking off his beard in lumps. "How will you put it on again?" she asked.

"The make-up man, Mr Desai, will make me another," explained Raju.

"Why didn't you grow a beard, too?" asked Dido.

"Because I play the role of a young, modern boy in the second play," said Raju. When he had removed the make-up on his face it was apparent that he was, indeed, a very young man, barely older than Anu.

"Oh, I thought you were very old. Even your voice was creaky," giggled Paro.

"I am glad you thought I was old," said Raju. "But I can assure you that creaky old voice isn't easy to produce. I don't seem to be able to get it loud enough."

"Yes, Uncle shouted 'project' to you, didn't he?" said Deepak.

"He did. Could you hear me clearly, Anu?" Raju asked.

"Yes, when you did the scene the second time."

"But I much prefer doing old character roles to straight young parts," went on Raju. "They are much more of a challenge."

Deepak made a mental note of what Raju had said and decided that he, too, would try out old character roles when

he got the chance.

"Where is the Queen?" asked Paro. "I do want to meet her."

"She was rather tired," replied Anu. She must have gone back to the hostel to rest."

"Here are your Coca-Colas, children," said Sati Didi, bustling in. "Raju, give me all your props, or you will lose them."

"Here they are, Didi," said Raju, handing her a book, a purse and a stick.

"Well, children," said Uncle Prem from the door, "how have you enjoyed your peep behind the scenes?"

"Very much, Uncle," said Deepak. "I liked the stage-setting. It was beautiful."

"We couldn't bring our own setting from Bombay, so we borrowed the setting from the National School of Drama. They produced the same play recently," said Uncle Prem.

"Is that a school for actors?" asked Dido.

"Yes."

"How grand!" cried Deepak.

"Raju, who has just done his B.A., hopes to join the School next term," explained Uncle Prem.

"Did you also go to that School, Ahmed Sahib?" asked Deepak.

"No such luck, Deepak," said Ahmed Sahib. "When I was young there were no schools for drama. I am just an amateur actor. I teach in a college and spend my spare time acting in Hind Manch plays or directing plays for my college drama club. But Raju and your generation are much luckier. You can become professional actors."

"Would you like to visit the School, Deepak?" asked Uncle Prem. "I have to return the sets tomorrow and thank the Director, and Raju is also coming to see the place."

"I would love to come, Uncle," said Deepak.

"Now we must hurry back to the house," continued Uncle Prem. "We have to have lunch and then be back at the theatre by 3 o'clock. Don't forget, the show this evening begins at 6.30 p.m."

A SCHOOL FOR ACTORS

"Tughlaq" was a great success. Everybody was talking of the fine team-work and the talented actors, specially those who had played Tughlaq, the Queen-Mother and Barani.

Next morning Deepak and Dido went with Uncle Prem in a truck to the theatre. They were met by Raju and Mr Katkar who helped to load the sets which had been dismantled on to the truck. They then drove to the National School of Drama. The School was in a large building surrounded by a spacious compound. As they entered, a slim, handsome young man came up to them.

"Welcome to the School, Raju," he cried.

"Hullo, Romesh. You're speaking too soon," replied Raju.

"After seeing you as Barani last evening, I am sure you stand a very good chance of being selected. Congratulations on your acting."

"Thanks," replied Raju and he introduced his friend to the others.

"Let's first go to the workshop where the sets have to be taken," said Romesh.

He took them into a large room where a man was working a noisy electric-saw. "This is where we make our sets," he shouted above the din.

Dido saw a young man working in a corner. "What is he doing?" he asked Romesh.

"That is Rao, one of our students. He is making a small-scale model of the setting for a play we are doing. Come and see it."

Dido was thrilled by the model, which was entirely made of very light wood. Even the chairs, beds, stools and doors were made to scale. It looked like a room in a doll's house.

"I wish Paro had come. She would have loved to see this. I wish I could learn to make a model."

"I thought you wanted to be an actor," said Raju.

"Deepak wants to be an actor," said Dido. "I shall be an architect like my father."

"Good," said Uncle Prem. "We need architects who know something about drama and acting to build us good theatres."

"Deepak will also have to work in the workshop," said Romesh. "All the students learn to design sets and help to make them. Let us go and visit some of the classes now."

Romesh first took them to a class where all the students were standing on their heads! This was the yoga class and they had come in during this particular exercise. Romesh explained that yoga helped to make an actor's body flexible and taught him how to relax his muscles. It also increased his stamina. Next door they could hear the jingle of bells and a drum beating. A dance class was in progress.

"They are learning a folk-dance," said Romesh. "Dancing helps an actor to be graceful and to acquire a sense of rhythm. And, of course, many of our plays, specially folk-plays, have dances in them."

In the next room two students were practising a song. "We also have music classes. Singing helps voice-projection," he added. "Now we'll go to our small indoor theatre."

The theatre was very small and neat. They entered quietly as an acting class was in progress.

Romesh whispered, "The students are improvising."

"What does that mean?" asked Dido.

"The teacher has given them a story. They have to act it, inventing as they go along. This is in'mime', that is, they use only actions, gestures and expressions but no dialogue."

Two boys and a girl were on the stage. The boys were fighting and the girl cried bitterly as she tried to separate them. Suddenly one of the boys hit out wildly and struck the girl instead of his rival. The girl fell down. The boys stopped fighting and tried to revive the girl. But she lay still and motionless. The boys wept and made up their quarrel over the body of the girl. "All right. Stop there," said a lady sitting in the first row. This was the teacher of acting. "Now, let's discuss the scene and see how it could have been improved."

"Let me take you down to our open-air theatre," whispered Romesh, as they crept out.

"Take the boys with you, Romesh," said Uncle Prem. "In the meantime I shall visit the Director and then join you later."

The visitors were delighted with the pretty open-air theatre. "The students helped in building it," said Romesh proudly.

"What else do you study?" asked Raju.

"Apart from the dance, yoga, music and acting classes

that you have seen, we also learn costume and scenic-design and study Indian and Western drama. We do both ancient Sanskrit and modern Indian plays."

"In Sanskrit?" asked Deepak alarmed by all this.

"No, in Hindi," smiled Romesh. "The Western plays we perform are all translated into Hindi. Then turning to Raju, he added, "I am taking the Producer's Course. Will you specialise in acting?"

"Yes, if I get in at all!" laughed Raju.

"I thought this was a School of Acting," said Dido.

"No, it is a school that teaches all theatre-crafts. You can be an actor, a producer, or a technician."

"I want to be an actor," said Deepak. "In fact, before Uncle Prem leaves, he has promised to help us do our first play."

"Let me know when it's on. I must see it," said Romesh.

"That's a promise!" laughed Deepak as Uncle Prem joined them.

PREPARATIONS

Anu was sitting in the garden reading a book and drying her long, curly hair. The second Hind Manch play in which she had a part was acted the evening before and she was a little tired. It had been a good performance. People had liked the play which tackled the problems of today's teenagers.

Tuppo was lying on his tummy, waving his legs in the air, very busy colouring a picture in his drawing-book.

Suddenly Dido and Deepak came running in through the gate.

"Anudi," panted Deepak breathlessly, as he flung himself down beside her, "Uncle Prem says he has got a play we can do and he says he will help us and I have asked some of my friends to act and will you please be our director because Uncle Prem says you are more knowledgeable than any of us and he says most of the work should be done by young . . . "

"Deepak, quiet please. You will burst my ear-drums," pleaded Anu, overcome by this torrent of words. "And what is more, young man, you will never make an actor if you gabble in such a gobbledy-gook fashion," she added, with mock severity.

"But you will, Anudi? Promise?"

"Promise what?"

"To direct our play."

"What play?"

"I just told you . . . " wailed Deepak.

Dido broke in. "Deepak, let me explain. You are too excited to talk sensibly. Deepak wanted to do a play about Amar Singh Rathod, but since we don't have one, Uncle Prem has found another play for us. It is based on a story from the *Panchatantra* and is called 'The Ungrateful Man'. "

"Oh, I know that play," said Anu, with interest. "I would love to do it."

"Mee-ee too!" shouted Tuppo, throwing aside his box of crayons.

"You too," promised Anu. "But Deepak, have you enough friends to fill all the parts? Aren't most of your class-fellows away since your school is closed for the Dussehra holidays?"

"A lot of our friends are here, Didi. Dido and I have spent all morning going round to ask them. I have asked them all to be here this evening at 4 o'clock. Uncle Prem said that although the rest of the Hind Manch group will be leaving tonight, he and you are staying on with us for the rest of the vacation. So we still have 15 days left to do the play."

"It's a long play," murmured Anu. "Perhaps we can cut it down. But here is Papa."

Uncle Prem had brought a copy of the play and the first thing they all did was to sit down and copy out the various parts. Anu and Uncle Prem cut some of the scenes to make it easier for the children to learn the lines in the

few days they had.

"Where will we put up our show?" asked Anu.

"We can do it outdoors in a garden. I have spoken to Mr Anwar and he says he can ask a friend who has a large garden in front of his house not far from here."

"Oh, that must be Mr Kapur," put in Dido. "Yes, Anu, the garden is very large and they have an open terrace leading on to the lawn. We can act on the terrace and the audience can sit on the lawn."

"I hope the terrace is not too high," said Anu.

"Oh, no, just two steps above the lawn."

"Sounds perfect. What about lighting, Papa?" she asked.

"I don't think we'll need more than a couple of spots as we'll be doing the show fairly early in the evening, after all. I'll get a friend from the theatre to help hire them. And Deepak," he continued, "I think it would be best if I was your stage-manager. Dido can be my assistant."

"Certainly," replied the boys.

"I feel it would be best to have one grown-up with young assistants in charge of each department, Papa," put in Anu. "Do you think your mother will help, Dido?"

"I just sent Paro to ask her if she would do our costumes. She is excellent at cutting and sewing and makes marvellous costumes. Paro and I always win prizes at fancy-dress shows and we never buy our costumes. Amma designs and makes them herself and Paro loves helping her."

"Mee-ee too!" cried Tuppo.

"Tuppo helps by muddling everything," said Dido and everyone laughed.

At 4 o'clock boys and girls began arriving at Deepak's

house. By 4.15 there were so many that Anu decided to spread a *durry* on the lawn.

"The first thing I must tell you," began Anu, sounding very much 'the director', "is that you must be on time for each rehearsal. We have very few days to do the play and we cannot waste a minute. If the rehearsal is at 4 o'clock, then please be here at 10 to 4 and not at 10 past 4."

The children who had arrived late smiled guiltily at one another.

"Moreover," went on Anu, "you must not make a fuss about the part you are given. Each part is equally important, although some are, of course, longer than others. Those who get small parts will have less to learn," she added.

The children laughed.

"The third point is that you must learn your lines very quickly. You have no home-work these days so you have plenty of time. Get someone to hear your lines and to give you your cues."

"What are cues?" asked a roly-poly boy who was sucking a sweet.

"Cues are the lines that come before your lines. You must know those too, or else you won't know when to speak. In fact, you will soon find that you know everybody's part. So cheer up and don't look so glum!"

After a brief test, Anu distributed the parts. Deepak was to be the Ungrateful Man. Dido was the Brahmin. Paro was given the role of the Princess. At first she felt rather shy and did not want to take it, but Dido said, "You wanted to be in the play, so don't fuss now."

Tuppo was promised a short appearance as a monkey

and, of course, it was very difficult to prevent him from running to the middle of the 'stage area' to do everybody else's part.

Rehearsals were held at Deepak's house. Although the living-room was small, his mother had moved out most of the furniture, so half of it was bare and could be made the stage.

Mrs Anwar came to the second rehearsal with a sheaf of papers which she showed to Anu.

"Papa! Papa!" called Anu excitedly, "do come and see these. Why, Mrs Anwar, you are a real artist! A superb designer! Look at the lovely costumes she has designed!"

It was a delightful surprise to everyone—except, of course, her own children. Each character was drawn on a separate sheet of drawing-paper, showing the costume the character would wear. The clothes were coloured and on the side were tacked bits of material of the type and colour of cloth to be used.

"You should be a professional designer," exclaimed Uncle Prem, laying the drawings out on a table so that all the children could see them. "I would love to have you design costumes for my next play."

"What a tease you are!" smiled Mrs Anwar. "Now Anu, I want to take the measurements of the children because I must buy the cloth and start cutting tomorrow."

"Have you enough helpers?" asked Anu.

"Yes, there's Deepak's mother and one or two of the older girls can also help in the mornings. We have two sewing-machines between us."

The music teacher from Deepak's school came to watch

a rehearsal and enjoyed it so much that she promised to help with the music. Some of the young actors were so shy that they had to be changed after a few days.

The two homes, Deepak's and Dido's, hummed with activity like busy, happy hives. Deepak found that working for a play took up all his time, plenty of energy and was great fun. There was so much to do that there wasn't a minute left to be bored or cross. Of course, there were small upsets, such as Anu scolding him for forgetting his lines or his *kurta* being far too tight. This had made Paro very grumpy, because her mother gave her the task of unstitching it, so that the seams could be let out. But these were minor matters. It seemed to Deepak that he had never been so happy in all his life.

THE GREAT DAY

On the morning that the play was to be performed, Dido and Deepak went with Uncle Prem to Mr Kapur's house. The terrace looked very gay, lined with pots of flowers. A few leaves lay scattered around.

"First we must clean the stage area and then clear the front of the flower-pots, or the audience will not be able to see above them."

"Where is the *mali?*" asked Deepak.

"Why do you want him?"

"To sweep the terrace."

"We can sweep it ourselves," said Uncle Prem, taking up a small garden broom that lay in a corner. "In the theatre, Deepak, we do not wait for others to do a job; we do it ourselves!"

"Oh, I did not mean I wouldn't do it," broke in Deepak, rather abashed.

"You and Dido can move the flower-pots. Arrange them attractively at the back, leaving the entrance free."

The boys and Uncle Prem soon had the terrace clean. Presently Anu and Deepak's mother arrived with the sets and properties and Uncle Prem's friend brought the spot-lights and a tape-recorder for the musical effects. Dido helped him to set up the lights.

When all the arrangements were complete, they went home for lunch and a short rest. Mrs Anwar and Paro had been busy ironing the costumes and getting together the make-up. At 4 o'clock all the children in the caste were to collect at the Kapurs'. The play was to start at 6 o'clock.

"Anu," said Deepak, "please take that scene between Dido and me again. The one in which I always seem to get my lines muddled."

"Now, Deepak, don't worry. You must learn to relax," reassured Anu. "You are doing your part very well. You will only tire yourself."

"Please . . ." coaxed Deepak.

"All right. But only once," smiled the young director. "Come on Dido."

They went through the scene. Deepak wanted to do it once more but Anu told him firmly that he should not unnecessarily exhaust himself.

Deepak threw himself into a chair. His head was buzzing with lines from his part. They seemed all confused in his mind and he was sure that he would forget everything when he went up on the stage. Did all actors feel this way?

"Dido," he called to his friend who was busy building a model with his meccano set, "can you remember your lines? Mine are all muddled!"

"Of course I remember them," was the calm reply. "I must have repeated those wretched lines a million times. I can even say them backwards. Should I show you . . ."

"No! No! Please don't," cried Deepak. "You'll only muddle me more."

At last it was 5 o'clock and everyone got ready to go

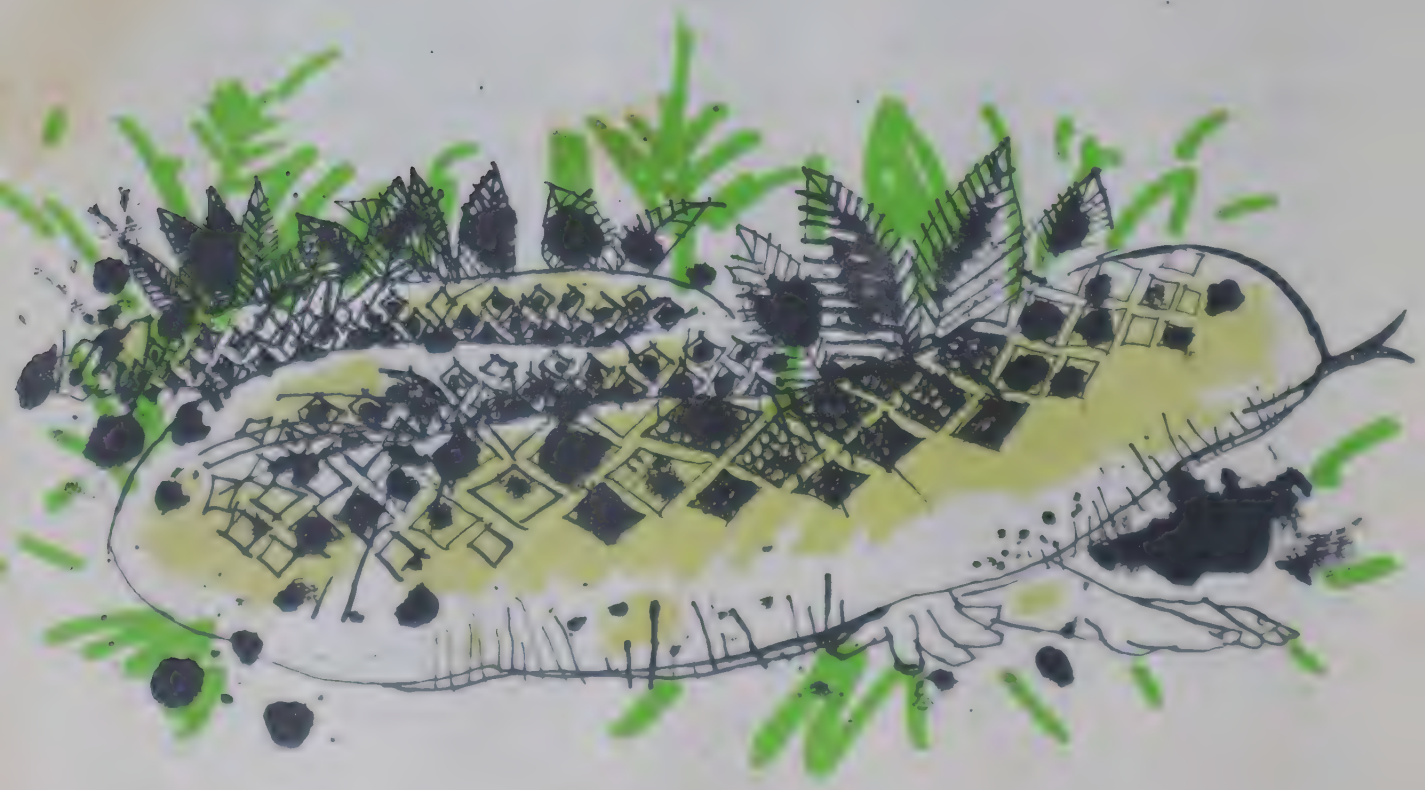
to Mr Kapur's garden. In a room that led off from the terrace, Mrs Anwar helped by Anu and two other girls got the actors into their costumes and put light make-up on them. It was 20 minutes to 6.

Deepak, who was now dressed and ready, suddenly asked, "Where is Dido?"

"Isn't he here? He went to borrow a wig," said Uncle Prem. Everyone was very upset. How could they begin without Rafiq? Paro was almost in tears.

"You mustn't cry, Paro. You'll smudge your make-up," scolded Anu who was feeling nervous herself.

Just then Deepak gave a shout, "There he is!" A tonga drove in with Rafiq driving it, sitting by the tonga-driver. He leapt down. "My cycle had a puncture. I could not find a taxi," he reported, breathlessly. "Just then a tonga came along. What a fine horse! He galloped all the way!"



"Never mind the horse," scolded Anu. "Go quickly and get dressed. Thank goodness you don't need much make-up."

Deepak heaved a sigh of relief. It was now 10 minutes to 6. He felt calm. All his nervousness had left him.

"Everyone in his place for the first entrances," said Uncle Prem in a whisper because the garden was now full of chattering parents and friends. "I shall ring two bells. The first at 5 minutes to 6, to warn the audience, and the second at 6 o'clock when the play will begin. Good luck!"

"Thank you, Uncle," chorused the children as they took their places.

The second bell rang. The big moment had arrived. The play began.

The play was about a well-meaning Brahmin who was very poor. His wife nagged and scolded him about their poverty till, at last, he decided to go and seek his fortune. On the way, he passed through a dark forest. He heard voices crying for help and found that a Monkey, a Tiger, a Snake and a Man, had all fallen into a well. The good Brahmin rescued the Monkey, the Tiger and the Snake. They thanked him and promised their help if he ever needed it. They also warned him not to rescue the Man as he was wicked and evil. But the kind-hearted Brahmin felt sorry for the Man and pulled him out of the well. The Man told him that he was a goldsmith from Kashi and solemnly swore to repay the Brahmin for his good deed.

On an occasion when the Brahmin was in trouble, the Monkey came to his aid. Another time his friend, the Tiger, gave him a gold necklace which he had found

on a dead body.

The Brahmin took the necklace to Kashi and went to the Goldsmith. Handing him the necklace he asked him to sell it for him. The ungrateful Goldsmith refused to believe that the Tiger had given the necklace to the Brahmin. He recognised the necklace as belonging to the King's son who had been killed in the forest. The Goldsmith reported the matter to the King and the Brahmin was put in prison as the Prince's murderer.

The Snake then appeared. He told the Brahmin that he would bite the King's daughter and that she would go into a coma from which no one would be able to rouse her. He then whispered to the Brahmin the secret that would cure her.

It happened just as the Snake had predicted. When the Princess was bitten by the Snake, she fell into a deep, deep sleep. No one could wake her. Then the Brahmin came forward and soon the Princess opened her eyes and sat up. The Brahmin told the King that the ungrateful Goldsmith had falsely accused him of murder. The Monkey, the Tiger and the Snake all came to the court to testify.

The King was furious with the Goldsmith and wanted to execute him, but the kind Brahmin begged the King to forgive him. So the Goldsmith was banished from the kingdom. The Brahmin was loaded with gifts and returned happily to his wife, accompanied by his friends, the Monkey, the Tiger and the Snake.

As the lights faded and all was dark, a burst of clapping and cheering broke out. The members of the cast, led by their director, Anu, took their places, in a line, in front of the terrace. Deepak was in the middle. The lights came on: more cheering broke out. The children bowed.

"Mee-too," shouted a voice, and Tuppo ran forward, clapping his hands.

Everybody laughed. The play was over and audience and actors mingled, chatting gaily.

"Coca-Cola and sweets for everyone," called Mrs Kapur, coming forward with a laden tray.

"How grand!" cried the children, flocking around her.

That night, Deepak, his mother, Anu and Uncle Prem were having a serious talk round the dinner-table. Tuppo was sound asleep in bed. Uncle Prem and Anu were to leave for Bombay the next day.

"Uncle," asked Deepak, "do you really think I could be an actor?"

"Well, son, you have a gift for acting, but you are rather young to decide yet. You may change your mind before you leave school, or even later while at college."

"Do you think it would be a wise choice?" asked

Mrs. Das.

"I don't see why not. There are going to be many openings for actors. There is radio, and television and a number of professional theatre groups will soon be performing in all major cities in the country."

"What do you feel you have learnt from this first experience, Deepak?" asked Anu.

"Well," replied Deepak, "I realise acting is far more difficult and serious than I had thought. One has to work hard. Then at the School of Drama, I found that they study plays from many countries. They do yoga and learn music and dancing. They also have to know how to design sets and costumes. In fact, it seems that an actor should know everything about theatre."

"That is the best training," put in Uncle Prem, "because then each person knows the problems and work the others have to tackle. You see, a theatre group . . . "

" . . . is a team!" broke in Anu and Deepak.

"So it is," laughed Uncle Prem. "They must all work together with great devotion to their art. Only then will we build a really grand theatre-movement in our country."

"It's getting rather late," said Deepak's mother. "We have to get up early to go to the station. We should go to bed now. Deepak, switch off the front lights."

Deepak got up to do as he was told. "And now back to the old school routine," he said, making a mock-sad face.

"All good things come to an end, even holidays," said Uncle Prem. "But here's to India's future actor, Deepak Das!"

And on that happy note they went to sleep.

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